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ABSTRACT

The development of collaboration at the school level to meet the needs of students with limited English proficiency and other special needs is discussed in this digest. The following topics are covered: barriers to collaboration (e.g., funding, turf issues); changing perceptions of collaboration; ways to promote collaboration, especially the need for administrative support; collaboration among teachers (e.g., initiating formal collaboration across disciplines, the special expertise of bilingual, English-as-a-Second-Language, and special education teachers); cooperative planning (e.g., establishing meeting times and rapport, targeting students, determining discrepancies between student skills and teacher expectations); and collaboration with parents (e.g., the use of cultural events and activities, trained interpreters and translators, handbooks and written forms in the languages of the families represented in the school). It is concluded that in an era of decreasing resources and rapidly increasing student diversity, collaboration is an essential strategy for enhancing resource utilization and program cost effectiveness. Collaboration can also provide the means to meet the educational needs of many students in mainstream and special education settings. (Contains 13 references.) (LB)

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Collaboration in Schools Serving Students with Limited English Proficiency and Other Special Needs

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Digest

December 1992

Collaboration in Schools Serving Students with Limited English Proficiency and Other Special Needs

(EDO-FL-91-10)

Prepared by Sandra H. Fradd, University of Miami

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Learning to work cooperatively and collaboratively with others to address the needs of specific students is not easy. Few educators have training in this area. Although collaborative cross-disciplinary programs are beginning to appear in schools, few school personnel have had training in applying multicultural concepts to addressing the needs of learners with disabilities and limited proficiency in English.

Collaboration across disciplines and grade levels cannot occur without an organizational structure that promotes interaction and communication. The local school level is the arena where collaboration can have an immediate impact on students. Although there is a strong movement toward collaboration, there are still many obstacles to be overcome in assisting special needs students with limited proficiency in English. This digest will discuss the development of collaboration at the school level to meet the needs of these students.

Barriers to Collaboration

Some barriers to collaboration have grown out of federal and state funding policies and practices. Territorial and political perceptions, as well as legal realities like weighted funding categories and requirements for program participation, stand in the way of promoting effective integrated programs. While the services to be provided through special programs were designed to assist students, supplemental and resource programs have had the effect of fragmenting instruction and promoting competition among funding recipients.

Changing Perceptions of Collaboration

Changes in educators' orientation toward collaboration have grown out of changes in the ways that effective instruction and school organization are perceived. The evolution of indicators for effective schools has occurred through research and practice founded on a belief in the importance of success for all students, not just for those who are academically talented (Fradd & Weismantel, 1989). An important aspect of the emergence of collaboration is the shift from a perception of the principal and teachers as solely responsible for educational outcomes to the perception of education as a process that includes teachers, parents, and students throughout (Stedman, 1987). The evaluation of the ways that schools involve the people who work and learn there continues as the press for multicultural equity and equality becomes more widespread and insistent.

Promoting Collaboration

Teachers, parents, and community members can encourage collaboration through informal as well as more formal interactions. Volunteering to assist others and sharing perspectives are means of promoting collaboration. Teachers and parents can influence administrators and policy makers by asking the kinds of questions that focus on process as well as on results; however, schoolwide collaboration and program integration are difficult without administrative support (Heron & Harris, 1987). Effective collaboration models exist (see, e.g., Allington & Broikou, 1988), but few of these models include the cultural and linguistic diversity that often complicate the collaborative process (Baca & Cervantes, 1989; Correa, 1989).

Collaboration Among Teachers

Collaboration can occur through informal interpersonal interaction and through structured formal interactions. Both are important and can provide positive outcomes. But collaboration across multicultural populations poses particular problems. At the informal level, collaborators gravitate toward those with whom they feel comfortable and compatible—often people with similar values and perspectives. However, this tendency to select persons with similar ideas and cultural backgrounds usually promotes the status quo. When people with different values enter the collaborative process, their ideas may be misunderstood and rejected unless the collaborators are prepared to deal with different ways of thinking and communicating (Fradd, 1991; in press).

One of the first steps in initiating formal collaboration across disciplines is the identification of the specific areas of interest, need, or expertise in each discipline that affect instruction. Each educator has strengths and limitations. For example, few regular education teachers are able to communicate in languages other than English; special education personnel may fail to comprehend the complexities of working with culturally diverse students and families; bilingual educators may lack an understanding of regular or special education requirements or curricula.

On the other hand, bilingual and ESOL teachers usually know about the development of students' English skills and how particular students compare with others of the same age from the same language background. They know how to integrate language development information with subject matter instruction and how to reduce the language demands of the task while maintaining a focus on the content of the lesson. These teachers usually are in close contact with parents, siblings, and the ethnic communities. They may be able to serve as cultural informants to help teachers and administrators address cultural as well as subject matter requirements of the students (Fradd & Weismantel, 1989).

Regular classroom teachers can compare the performance of individual special needs students with that of mainstream students. They observe the students interacting with peers and know the students with whom the target students prefer to interact. These teachers also notice the types of activities that motivate students and are aware of the ways in which particular students approach or avoid tasks (Baca & Cervantes, 1989).

Special education teachers are experienced at developing effective behavior management programs, breaking the learning process into specific steps, and instructing students in useful strategies for ap-

proaching and mastering academic content. They observe behaviors and record and monitor learning. These facts can be useful in developing effective plans and programs.

Unfortunately, teachers are often unaware of the types of information available from their potential collaborators; thus they may not ask each other for specific information or request advice in developing instructional plans. In an informal collaborative setting, contributions from those of varying backgrounds may be neglected. The establishment of formal collaborative procedures can facilitate the exchange of information and ideas among different teachers and help foster the development of a collaborative and cooperative atmosphere that may lead to informal collaboration in the future.

Cooperative Planning

Strategies have been developed for establishing and maintaining collaboration to assist LEP students with mild disabilities. One such strategy is referred to as "cooperative planning" (Hudson & Fradd, 1990). An important feature of this strategy is that none of the personnel involved is recognized as more of an authority than the others. All are considered equals within their areas of expertise and all have areas in which they can develop new skills for working with LEP students. The steps in cooperative planning listed below can be implemented through formal planned procedures or through informal interactions among colleagues.

- Establish meeting times
- Establish and maintain rapport
- Discuss demands of each instructional setting
- Target the students
- Specify and summarize data
- Discuss student information
- Determine discrepancies between student skills and teacher expectations
- Plan instruction intervention and monitoring system
- Implement the plan and follow up as needed

Collaborative skills can be developed by meeting regularly to discuss student needs and to monitor student progress. This process can also allow educators to determine the specific interventions that lead toward success (Damico & Nye, 1991).

Collaboration with Parents

Once teachers have begun successful cooperation among themselves, they may also want to involve the students' families. The school experience for LEP students, and probably for many others, is likely to be viewed from different perspectives by the many people involved—the most extreme differences usually occurring between family members and school personnel (Casanova, 1990). Recognition of these potential differences was acknowledged in federal legislation that requires that parents be included in the planning process when students are placed in special education programs (Casanova, 1990). Without information from the parents, many assumptions may be made about the students that do not reflect the parents' perspective. Parents can provide important information about the student's status and behavior in the family and in the community, as well as information about family and community norms.

In addition to parent programs that promote a general understanding of the school system, specific programs for fostering understanding and collaboration between families and the school can be developed (FIRST, 1991). Means of assessing the family's present circumstances in order to provide understanding and support include obtaining information on the family's resources, their interactional styles, and the ways family members participate in the community (Correa, 1989). Learning about the family's experiences prior to and since their arrival in the United States, their religious beliefs and practices, parenting practices, and roles ascribed to family members and close friends can also help the school plan collaborative programs and activities with family members (Correa, 1989).

Involving family members in the teaching process can benefit students, families, and the school community in general. Interaction between families and schools can enhance understanding of school practices and school culture in addition to promoting learning activities in the home. Instructional programs using the home language as well as English provide the greatest opportunities for family participation as this type of collaboration is fostered through direct communication between the home and school in the language that is most comfortable for the family members. A number of books and programs are available for encouraging parent involvement in bilingual literacy development (see, e.g., Saunders, 1986). Suggestions for involving parents in school programs include the following:

- cultural events and activities that involve students and families;
- displays of student art and other products that families can enjoy;
- written and oral communication in the language of the home;
- designated school personnel from whom families can obtain information about school events, student achievement, and concerns;
- trained interpreters and translators to serve as informants and communicators in working with families and school personnel;
- handbooks and written forms available in the languages of the families represented in the school; and
- trained personnel to discuss student performance and school culture with families.

Conclusion

In an era of decreasing resources and rapidly increasing student diversity, collaboration is an essential strategy for enhancing resource utilization and program cost effectiveness. Collaboration can also provide the means to meet the educational needs of many students in mainstream and special education settings. As administrators, teachers, and parents learn to collaborate, they increase learning opportunities for themselves and for their children.

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